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The Contributing Factors of Pragmatic Failure in China's ELT Classrooms

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Abstract

Pragmatic failure is the inability to understand what is meant by what is said, which can often lead to misunderstanding or confusion in cross-cultural communication. For this reason, the present article explores the contributing factors of pragmatic failure in China's ELT Classrooms. According to the exploration, the following factors are found out: teacher-centered teaching; lack of authentic input; teaching English without considering the cultural differences; linguistic competence oriented evaluation system. Some effective measures are also put forward to deal with these deficiencies, such as, task-based teaching; authentic English teaching materials and pragmatic competence oriented evaluation system.

Keywords: pragmatic failure, contributing factors, China's ELT classrooms

1. Introduction

As we know, only a good mastery of linguistic knowledge can not ensure successful linguistic communication if a non-native speaker does not have enough understanding of the pragmatic rules of the target language. It is argued that pragmatic competence plays an important role in making a linguistic communication successful, so it is of crucial importance for English teachers to pay much more attention to the cultivation of pragmatic competence in ELT classrooms.

For decades, in China's ELT classrooms, much attention has been focused on the cultivation of the student's linguistic competence, that is to say, the ELT pedagogies adopted by the English teachers mainly facilitate the student's mastery of a large number of English words and a rich grammar while neglecting the cultivation of the student's pragmatic competence. Fortunately, more and more scholars have recognized the importance of the cultivation pragmatic competence in ELT classroom. For this purpose, the present article explores the contributing factors of of pragmatic failure in China's ELT Classrooms and puts forward some suggestions to deal with these deficiencies.

2. Pragmatic Failure

Pragmatic failure refers to "the inability to understand what is meant by what is said" (Thomas. 1983: 91). Thomas (1983) chose the term "pragmatic failure" instead of "pragmatic error" in that unlike grammatical errors, which can be judged according to prescriptive rules, pragmatic competence entails probable rather than categorical rules. Therefore, it is impossible for us to say that the pragmatic force of an utterance is wrong, but rather it failed to achieve the speaker's purpose. According to the nature of the failures, two kinds of pragmatic failures can be identified: pragmalinguistic failure and sociolinguistic failure.

Pragmalinguistic failure "occurs when the pragmatic force mapped on to a linguistic token or structure is systematically different from that normally assigned to it by native speakers, or when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2." (Thomas, 1983: 92) Let's take a look at the following conversation:

A: Is Suzhou a nice place?

B: Of course.

In this conversation, B intended to agree by using "of course", which means "you are right"; while in that context "of course" means "What a stupid question!" to the native speakers.

Sociopragmatic failure arises from "cross-cultural mismatches in the assessment of social distance, of what

constitutes an imposition, of when an attempt at a 'face-threatening act' should be abandoned, and in evaluating relative power, rights, and obligations, etc." (Thomas, 1983: 95) For example, the English-speaking people and the Chinese people take different views towards modesty. When being complimented, e.g. "You are really an excellent basket-ball player", the Chinese people always say "No, no, I am a poor basket-ball player"; while the English-speaking people will say "Thank you, that's because I have practiced a lot." In the Chinese culture, it is considered to be modest to decline a compliment, but in cross-cultural communication, it may make one think that the compliment-giver has a poor sense of judgement.

As we know, native speakers can easily recognize linguistic errors and they often take such errors as evidence of lack of language proficiency, which does not normally take offence. If a person says something grammatically incorrect, he is at worse condemned as "speaking badly". As for pragmatic failures, they reflect badly on a speaker as a person. If a person says something inappropriately, he will be judged as "behaving badly" and will be considered to be insincere, untruthful and deceitful. Thus, only a good mastery of linguistic knowledge can not ensure successful linguistic communication with native speakers if a non-native speaker does not have some understanding of the pragmatic rules.

3. Underlying Causes of Pragmatic Failure

The causes of pragmatic failure are various. But generally speaking, we can group them into the following three aspects.

Firstly, pragmatic failure can be teaching-induced. For instance, a source of teaching- induced pragmatic failure goes to the over-emphasis on the parallel between the grammatical category "the imperative " and the speech act "ordering", but actually, "imperatives are scarcely ever used to command or request in formal spoken English" (Thomas, 1983: 148).

Secondly, pragmatic failure can result from the negative transfer of pragmatic knowledge from L1. At the pragmalinguistic level, the inappropriate transfer happens when speakers try to transfer from their L1 to L2, the utterances being transferred are semantically/syntactically equivalent, but carry a different pragmatic force in the target language for the sake of 'interpretive bias'. At the sociolinguistic level, linguistic choices are affected by the cross-cultural mismatches in assessing social distance and the constituents of an imposition, and in evaluating relative power, rights and obligations, etc. These differences can be clearly demonstrated in the communication between people from different cultures who take different views towards the notion of "free" and "non-free" goods. For example, in the western culture it is impolite to ask directly about a stranger's income, age and marital status, whereas in the Chinese culture such information can be sought freely and without circumlocution.

Thirdly, L2 learners do not always transfer some aspects of universal or L1-based pragmatic knowledge to L2 communication. They " tend towards literal interpretation, taking utterances at face value rather than inferring what is meant from what is said and underusing context information" (Kasper, 1997: 49). "Although highly context-sensitive in selecting pragmatic strategies in their own language, learners may underdifferentiate such context variables as social distance and social power in L2" (Kasper, 1997: 52). For example, when a friend of yours came to see you, two hours later he was about to go, you could say "Would you like to stay a bit longer?" But when there is a power relation involved, say, when your landlord came to collect the rent, after you had paid the rent and she was about to go, you said, "Would you like to stay a bit longer?" Your invitation would make her feel puzzled, wondering why she was asked to stay a bit longer.

4. The Contributing Factors of Pragmatic Failure

Although in recent years several teaching methods, such as the Direct Method, the Natural Method and the Communicative Method, have been experimented in classrooms, it is still the Grammar Translation Method that is dominating our ELT. Generally speaking, we can attribute the domination of the Grammar Translation Method to the following principal factors. Firstly, the class size is too large. Secondly, the textbooks are not well designed for the other teaching methods. Thirdly, not all English teachers are capable of carrying out the ELT effectively enough. Lastly, our evaluation system, which is linguistic competence oriented, still does not attempt to tap into communicative abilities. From a pragmatic point of view, the deficiencies existing in our ELT classrooms can be summarized as follows: focusing on the instruction of the student's linguistic competence, ignoring the cultivation of the student's pragmatic competence.

4.1 Teacher-Centered Teaching

Today, most of the English teachers conduct their ELT in the following way. Firstly, students read after the teacher the new words and the new text. Secondly, the teacher explains the text sentence by sentence, both

semantically and syntactically. Thirdly, the teacher provides the students with examples to illustrate the important words and phrases. Lastly, the students are asked to use the important words and phrases to make sentences. During the whole process of teaching, it is the teacher who does most of the talking, which is to the detriment of the student's speaking opportunities. Therefore, it can be easily recognized that the negative effects of this teaching method exist in the following three areas:

Firstly, this teaching method virtually does little to enhance the student's communicative ability. For students, English language learning means a tedious experience of memorizing endless lists of grammar rules and vocabulary. Even though some students can produce grammatically correct sentences, they may not know how to use them properly in appropriate social contexts. Due to the domination of the teacher, students have little chance to speak, not to mention to cultivate their communicative competence.

Secondly, students are not motivated. As we know, intrinsic motivation plays a decisive role in helping students achieve their school success. So a teacher should think themselves not so much as "an information deliverer to students, but more as a facilitator of learning whose job it is to set the stage for learning, to start the wheels turning inside the heads of the students, to turn them on to their own abilities, and to help channel those abilities in fruitful directions."(Brown, 1994: 19) But in such classes, teachers have almost arranged everything for the students, so it is hard for the students to be active participants. Furthermore, for most of the Chinese students, learning English means passing entrance exams. Not surprisingly they spend most of their time working on test skills and language knowledge instead of language ability.

Thirdly, in such classes, students do not actively participate in learning, but only passively receive the information. In this respect, learning is not meaningful enough, that is to say, it is a kind of rote learning.

4.2 Lack of Authentic Input

Despite many years of effort, many English learners in China are not able to use the language in real communications. One of the factors leading to this disappointing outcome is a lack of authentic input. As it is, one of the necessary conditions for successful language learning is a sufficient exposure to authentic, diverse, comprehensible and demanding linguistic and cultural materials of the target language. However, in China, students have little opportunity to expose themselves to the English environment to acquire knowledge, the teaching materials and the instructions of their teachers are the major sources upon which they can build up their English language proficiency. But unfortunately, our English texts, which are mostly selected in terms of their literal value, for the purpose of practicing grammatical items and with the aim of improving the student's reading ability, are not well designed for catering to the need of cultivating the student's pragmatic competence. Examples from Junior English for China Book One:

1) —What' s your name?
   —My name is Lilei.
   —How old are you?
   —I'm thirteen.
2) —Are you writing a letter to your grandfather?
   —Yes, I am.
   —How often do you write to your grandfather?
   —Twice a month.

From a pragmatic point of view, these materials are not authentic enough, because opening a dialogue in this way is to interfere with the hearer's privacy. They can be used as good examples for students to practice linguistic items. But aside from being used as examples to cultivate the student's linguistic competence, it should also be made known to the students that English-speaking people seldom open their dialogues in this way. Only when the students have grasped the linguistic knowledge and come to know how to use the corresponding linguistic knowledge to communicate appropriately, can we say that our teaching goal has been attained.

Besides, in order to provide appropriate authentic input, a teacher needs to be proficient in the target language. Being a creative process, English classroom teaching requires teachers to possess a broad range of knowledge, appropriate teaching methods and practical language aptitude. To do their job effectively, teachers should acquire rich language skills as well as conduct teaching and learning research that can assist them in carrying out teaching tasks easily and successfully. But such teachers are often in short supply in China's English classrooms. It is a prevalent phenomenon in China that many English teachers tend to be over-confident about their

competence and performance, arguing that they already have enough knowledge to teach English, which leads them to neglect their self-development. If a teacher himself/herself does not have a good command of English, how can then the students sitting in his/her classroom receive sufficient and authentic input?

4.3 Teaching English without Considering the Cultural Differences Sufficiently

As a social activity, language does not exist in vacuum but exists in a certain community. Being an integral part of a certain culture, different languages sometimes give the same entity with different cultural implications. Culture is the substance of language, without knowledge of the English culture, we can never be versed in the English language, because the best cream and the most nationalized diction of the English language can only be grasped through the comparison between our own culture and the target culture. Therefore, English teachers should try to set up a bridge across the English culture and the Chinese culture by means of acquainting students with the knowledge of the western cultural traditions, Greek mythology and Christian thought. If the cultural differences are ignored, the effect of the English language study will be greatly affected, or even some misunderstanding will occur in cross-cultural communication.

Culture is always associated with the people who create it. The English people respect personal privacy, although they tend to be more direct and frank. On the contrary, the Chinese like to inquire about each other's personal affairs, such as age, marriage, income and family, which is considered a polite way of showing concern. In cross-cultural communication, the Chinese often ignore this cultural difference, which results in communicative breakdown. In China's ELT classrooms, this cultural difference is not paid enough attention to, because matters regarded as privacy in the English culture are not perceived as such in the Chinese culture.

In our ELT classrooms, such cultural differences are also often neglected in the teaching of English vocabulary. For example, bamboo is a popular plant in the southern part of China and there is a well-known idiom "Yuhouchunsun" in the Chinese culture which means that many new things are springing up. So when this word is being introduced, some teachers often use it to make a sentence like "spring up like bamboo-shoots after a spring rain". But in England, bamboo is not a popular plant at all, even the word "bamboo" is a borrowed one. Therefore, if we want to use an English idiom to express the same meaning as "Yuhouchunsun", we must find one which has its own specific English cultural implications. Mushroom, a popular plant in the English culture that grows rapidly, is used to express the same meaning as "Yuhouchunsun"，hence the idiom "to mushroom up".

4.4 Linguistic Competence Oriented Evaluation System

For decades, our evaluation system is designed to test a student's linguistic competence, even the entrance examination to higher education, for which the high school students have been preparing painstakingly, is designed the same way. Therefore, what students should do is to remember a great number of English words and grammatical rules to get high grades in the examinations that occur so frequently. For Chinese students, learning English well means that they can get high grades in every English examination. So what they should do is trying their best to recite texts, do grammar exercises and memorize the vocabulary. As a result, examinations for them are "dark clouds hanging their heads, upsetting them with thunderous anxiety as they anticipate the lightning bolts of questions they don't know, and worst of all, a flood of disappointment if they don't make the grade." (Brown, 1994: 33)

Under this evaluation system, students deal with all sorts of examinations skillfully, just like fish in water, but they may not be able to communicate smoothly and appropriately. They know the English words, sentences and grammatical rules perfectly well, but they may have trouble choosing the proper expression in a specific context. Once, several foreign teachers came to school the author was teaching in, some top Senior students were called in to show them around the campus. When a foreign teacher spoke highly of the beautiful scenery of the campus by saying, "You have a beautiful campus", one of our top students answered, "Where, where, our campus is not beautiful at all." Obviously, the student's answer, which was grammatically correct, made the foreign teacher totally at a loss, because denying a praise is a way of showing modesty, thus considered a virtue in our culture. However, in the English culture the appropriate response to the praise above should be "That's because we have a wise headmaster" or a similar one, which expresses agreement with the speaker.

5. Conclusion

Pragmatic failure can often lead to misunderstanding or confusion in cross-cultural communication, thus it is of crucial importance to cultivate the student's pragmatic competence in ELT classrooms. Pragmatic competence can be cultivated effectively if proper strategies are adopted. Task-based learning, which means that specific tasks are set for students so that they can act as if they were using the language in real life, helps students learn the correct rules of the English language from meaningful and practical tasks. Besides, authentic English

teaching materials are in demand so that students could get into contact with the real English language. Teachers should also teach the social knowledge and the cultural background knowledge of the English language to increase the student's cultural awareness. Furthermore, our evaluation system mainly facilitates the training of students with "high grades, low competence". Therefore, the evaluation system, a yardstick used to measure a student's school work, must be reformed to meet the needs of the society, hence an evaluation system of pragmatic competence oriented is an urgent need.

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